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3 Ex-Reagan Aides Say Envoy to Vatican Visited Libya on His Own

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 19 — Three former White House national security advisers said today that the former United States Ambassador to the Vatican had been ordered repeatedly to cease unauthorized contacts with Libyan officials, and that the Ambassador had gone to Tripoli in November 1985 without telling anyone in the United States Government.

The former national security advisers said, in interviews and through intermediaries, that the ambassador, William A. Wilson, had apparently misled the Italian Foreign Minister, Giulio Andreotti, into thinking that because of Mr. Wilson's known friendship with President Reagan the White House was behind his request that the Italians set up a meeting for him with Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, the Libyan leader, in Libya.

Official American policy throughout this Administration has been to isolate the Libyans.

Italian Arranged the Meeting

But Mr. Andreotti, who has urged that there be contacts between the United States and Libya, facilitated the Wilson request and arranged the meeting, which occurred on Nov. 28, 1985. Officials have said they did not learn of it until Colonel Qaddafi mentioned in passing that he had had a meeting, and it was not publicly disclosed until March 1986.

The uproar over the visit led Nancy Reagan to prevail on her husband to dismiss Mr. Wilson in May 1986, a former senior White House official said today.

The question of Mr. Wilson's activities, first as Mr. Reagan's personal representative to the Holy See from 1981 to 1984, and then as Ambassador from 1984 until his forced resignation last May, has been revived because of statements by Italian officials in recent days suggesting that Mr. Wilson might have had a secret White House endorsement for his dealings with the Libyans.

A Sore Subject

As the Administration put pressure on Italy to cut its ties to Libya this year, Mr. Wilson's contacts with the Libyans became a sore subject with senior Italian officials, who complained privately about an apparent inconsistency in American policies. This may have encouraged Mr. Andreotti and another senior Italian official, Antonio Badini, to speak more frankly when journalists asked them about the circumstances surrounding Mr. Wilson's actions, including his trip to Libya in November 1985.

Mr. Badini, chief foreign affairs adviser to Prime Minister Bettino Craxi, was quoted in today's issue of The New York Times as saying he had discussed Mr. Wilson's activities with Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, then the national security adviser, during the economic summit conference in Tokyo last May. According to Mr. Badini, Admiral Poindexter said Mr. Wilson "had gotten a green light" to deal with the Libyans

from William P. Clark when Mr. Clark was national security adviser from early 1982 to October 1983.

Mr. Badini was also quoted as saying that Mr. Clark's successor, Robert C. McFarlane, had also approved Mr. Wilson's contacts.

A Denial From Poindexter

Through an intermediary, Admiral Poindexter denied ever discussing Mr. Wilson with Mr. Badini. He said that he remembers meeting for about 40 minutes with the Italian official in Tokyo, but that Mr. Wilson was not discussed. He also denied that Mr. Wilson ever had authority to deal with the Libyans.

Mr. McFarlane emphatically denied in an interview that he had authorized Mr. Wilson's dealings. A similar denial was made in an interview by Mr. Clark.

"I know with total clarity that Wilson approached me twice, once face-to-face, and once by telephone, to suggest that he be in touch with various Libyans," Mr. McFarlane said in a telephone interview. "On each occasion, I told him emphatically, no — no contact with any Libyan under any circumstances, ever."

He said that he knew nothing about Mr. Wilson's trip to Libya in November 1985 at the time. It was only when the report appeared in The New York Times last March that he learned of it, he said.

Mr. Clark said that it came to his attention in 1982 from Italian sources that Mr. Wilson had been in touch with low-level Libyan officials in Rome. He

said that he contacted Mr. Wilson and warned him to stop meeting the Libyans. In addition, he said that he instructed Mr. McFarlane, then his deputy, to repeat the warning during a trip to Rome in that period.

In Rome, Mr. Badini said tonight that he had no comment in response to the denials by Admiral Poindexter, Mr. Clark and Mr. McFarlane.

Mr. Wilson did not return telephone calls to his office in California either today or on Thursday.

If, as reported, Mr. Wilson's meetings with Libyans were unauthorized, the question arises why he was able to retain his position overseas for so long.

Mr. Wilson's motivations are a source of debate. In his sole public statement about his ties to Libya, in June, he said the only reason for them was "for the purpose of providing complete information to the United States Government."

One high official said that Mr. Wilson, who was a senior executive in the Pennzoil Corporation, had been persuaded by associates in the oil industry to pursue an improvement in relations with Libya. But another official said Mr. Wilson believed he had some unspecified mandate from the President to undertake such missions.

According to a source familiar with the National Security Council under Mr. Clark, the Central Intelligence Agency had been alerted by Italian intelligence about Mr. Wilson's meetings in a Rome hotel with Libyans.